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‘Mobile Love Videos Make Me Feel Healthy’: Rethinking ICTs for Development

Indira Maya Ganesh
November 2010

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‘Mobile Love Videos Make Me Feel Healthy’: Rethinking ICTs for Development

Indira Maya Ganesh

Summary

ICT4D discourses tell stories of poor farmers using the internet to compare crop prices, and nurses who use SMS to remind people to take their anti-retrovirals. Do nurses also use work-mobiles to make private phone calls? Do farmers surf for pornography when they are supposed to be comparing crop prices? In the ICTs for Development discourse, ICTs are positioned as tools and processes to fight poverty and facilitate empowerment through economic and educational gains; I argue that this discourse ignores the diverse ways in which the poor and the marginalised use media technologies in their everyday lives for social networking, entertainment, to produce and participate in intimate and erotic economies, and to express and experience their sexuality, relationships, pleasure and intimacy in ways that could also be considered empowering. Media use (like development) is an area where sexualities are actively made and remade. ICT4D needs to include an understanding of the potential emotional and sexual effects of interventions. Ethnographic studies of media consumption and use are needed to provide a deeper understanding of sexuality in a way that contributes to applications in a development context.

This paper presents one such ethnographic study on how a community uses mobile phones, with the hope that it may provide clues and cues for people and organisations working across these related areas of ICT4D, sexuality, culture and gender. This paper presents a short pilot project of in-depth interviews with six self-identified Kothis, a South Asian feminine male identity. This was supported by observations of and participation in weekly support group meetings in an HIV related NGO of which they are members. The study finds that ICTs changes possibilities for finding sex, love and social mobility, as well as presenting new channels for harassment by police and others.

Keywords: sexuality; gender; ICTs; ICT4D; technology.

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Preface to Sexuality and Development Working Paper Series

Sexuality has been side-lined by development. Associated with risk and danger, but hardly ever with pleasure or love, sex has been treated by development agencies as something to be controlled and contained. The AIDS epidemic has broken old taboos and silences, and begun to open up space for the recognition of how central sexual rights are to everyone's wellbeing. But more is needed to take us beyond the confines of narrow problem-focused thinking about sexuality towards approaches in which pleasure and desire play as large a part as danger and death do today.

Sexuality is a vital aspect of development. It affects people's livelihoods and security, their wellbeing, and sometimes their very survival. Sexual rights are a precondition for reproductive rights and for gender equality. Lack of sexual rights affects heterosexual majorities as well as sexual minorities – lesbians and gay men, bisexuals, transgendered and intersex people – who are so often denied basic human rights and subjected to violence and exclusion. In some countries, women are denied a choice of partner, subjected to coercive marital sex and restricted in their mobility. Pervasive homophobia places those married men who desire other men, their male partners and their wives at greater risk of HIV and AIDS. Adolescents schooled into abstinence learn little about their bodies or their desires, and may be more vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection as a result. And sex workers are routinely denied basic legal and employment – as well as broader human – rights. Rare is the environment which allows people to live out a fulfilling and pleasurable sexuality of their choice and that empowers people with a sense of their right to say 'yes' as well as 'no' and enjoy safe, loving relationships free of coercion and violence.

Issues of sex and sexuality are all too often associated with silence, shame and stigma. Solutions that are framed by a discourse that problematises sex offer limited scope for transforming the way in which development actors work on these issues. It is all too easy to focus on the negatives that we highlight above and to conspire with a silence within them about unruly desires, about pleasuring the senses, and about love. The turn to rights in international development discourse may offer new openings for the articulation of sexuality and development, and new opportunities for realising sexual rights. This series of working papers enters the debate about sexual rights from the perspective of development. Together, the papers seek to challenge orthodoxies and bring fresh thinking to the challenges of making sexual rights real. With thanks to DFID for funding this paper, and to SDC and Sida for funding the Visiting Fellowship programme during which the author began her writing.

Susie Jolly and Kate Hawkins
Sexuality and Development Programme, IDS

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Indira Maya Ganesh

Disclaimer

Some sections of this paper contain explicit language and scenes of a sexual nature, which may offend some readers.

Acronyms

| | |
|------|---|
| DFID | Department for International Development |
| ICTs | Information and Communications Technologies |
| IMEI | International Mobile Equipment Identity |
| IPC | Indian Penal Code |
| IT | Information Technology |
| MDGs | Millennium Development Goals |
| MSM | Men who have Sex with Men/Males who have Sex with Males |
| NFI | Naz Foundation International |
| NGO | non-governmental organisation |
| PPP | public-private partnerships |
| SITE | Satellite Instructional Television |
| SMS | Short Messaging Service |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| VCD | Video Compact Disc |
| WSIS | World Summits on the Information Society |

1 Introduction

1.1 It begins with jiggling wires ...

Some years ago I worked for an international development agency; my role was to prepare and test a curriculum for HIV prevention for out-of-school young people in rural areas of a high prevalence state in India. It was during this project that I came across anecdotal evidence of how the poor, rural and marginalised were incorporating Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) into their everyday lives in innovative and unexpected ways. During the needs-assessment phase at the start of the programme, I spoke to young men and women about their media consumption. In a drought affected cluster of villages a group of boys volunteered to tell me about how they fulfil their entertainment needs.

This particular Indian village is located in an impoverished region of an otherwise prosperous state. It is drought prone and records low indicators on health, education and literacy for girls and women. Despite its poverty, many villages here are connected through television, radio and public telephones. Some villages in this area are electrified.

In terms of homes and families, while everyone has chores and responsibilities inside and outside the home, boys generally have more opportunities for leisure and free time. They also have more mobility than their female peers who cannot stray very far from home.

Boys with 'connections' travel to the slightly bigger village 20 kilometres away to borrow VCDs (Video Compact Discs) of English-language Blue Films from a grocery store owner who has a small side business in video piracy. They leave a deposit with him and take the VCDs home. One of the better-off boys in the village has a VCD player and television set at his disposal. When the coast is clear, usually during prime-time television programming, other members of the Core Group jiggle all the TV antennae on the tops of houses thus disrupting the reception. This is a signal that a 'special' screening is about to begin. Families get upset by the disrupted reception in the middle of their favourite programmes; the diversion works brilliantly, for now viewers begin to fiddle with wires and knock at the sides of their TV sets, as most of us do when faced with malfunctioning technology objects. The boys make excuses to leave the house, usually something along the lines of 'can't be bothered to hang around waiting for the TV to come back on'.

This vignette inspired a grudging admiration at the boys' tenacity, but also shocked some of my colleagues at the development agency that young, poor boys are in fact so sexual and will go to great lengths to access sexual titillation. There was also concern over how damaging media images can be for teenagers' notions of sexuality and relationships. Then there were concerns about how to address HIV prevention in light of this discovery: were these boys at a high risk for HIV because they were 'sex-hungry'? If they were so 'addicted' to pornography, that too watching it in groups, to what other lengths could they go? Were they already having sex, being (possibly) fired up by blue

films? Would they have sex with each other because of social norms that prescribe gender segregation before marriage? How could the effects of pornography on ideas of safe, 'healthy' sexuality be undone? *And who knows what other sexual shenanigans boys across these villages were up to?*

I was instantly charmed by this story. Many assumptions and beliefs about sexuality tumbled out readily from this group of Programme Officers, most of whom were otherwise wary of discussing it. I liked that the boys were resisting the marginalisation of their physical location by using different technologies – VCDs, television, VCD players, social networks, deception – to connect with content that originated elsewhere. It demonstrated agency, team-work, participation and cooperation, skills that they did not display much of in participating in the HIV prevention programmes earnestly being designed for them. It defined networks and networking, anew. The boys' interactions suggested multiple, invisible(ised) exchanges and negotiations, both symbolic and tangible, that underlie media access and use, as well as in their own developing sexualities. It reiterated that the poor, even in drought affected villages are, after all, sexual. The story returns to me every time I hear about poor farmers who use the internet in *mandis* (wholesale markets) to compare crop prices, and nurses who use SMS (Short Messaging Service) to remind people to take their anti-retrovirals. How do their lives adjust to the presence of media objects and what does it mean to them outside of their jobs? How do media and technology objects impinge on their everyday interactions, relationships and hierarchies? Did they acquire more status in their communities or inspire jealousy in their peers? Do nurses use work-mobiles to make private phone calls? Do farmers surf for pornography when they are supposed to be comparing crop prices?

1.2 My argument

My experience on this consultancy sparked my interest in the affective interactions between people and technologies, which is the subject of this paper. This paper explores these interactions in relation to sexuality, development and ICTs.

In the ICTs for Development discourse, ICTs are positioned as tools and processes to fight poverty and facilitate empowerment; I argue that this discourse ignores the diverse ways in which the poor and the marginalised use media technologies in their everyday lives for social networking, entertainment, to produce and participate in intimate and erotic economies, express and experience their sexuality, relationships, pleasure and intimacy in ways that could be considered as empowering. Media use (like development) is an area where sexualities are actively made and remade (Chen 2003; Magnet 2007; Senfst 2000; Turkle 1995; White 2003). ICT4D needs to include an understanding of the potential affective and sexual effects of interventions. Ethnographic studies of media consumption and use are needed to provide a deeper understanding of sexuality in a way that contributes to applications in a development context.

There is little by way of academically and historically grounded writing about how people are experiencing and shaping these technologies (and vice versa) in ICT4D and other contexts. Would it be possible to conceive of people-centred research and documentation that captures this, and then informs applications of media technologies? This paper summarises the beginnings of a more extensive inquiry into how a community uses mobile phones, with the hope that it may provide clues and cues for people and organisations working across these related areas of ICT4D, sexuality, culture and gender.

1.3 My position and interest

In the late 1990s I came to interact with and know Kothis and organisations and individuals working with Kothis, primarily in West Bengal but also in some other parts of the country. Having been friends with urban, English-speaking, middle class gay men, the 'Kothi identity' was a fascinating departure from what I had known. Cut to the late 2000s when I was undertaking an exploration of how different groups of people experience and manipulate multiple identities and relationships across and through technologies like social networking sites, mobile phones, internet chat and so on. I was curious about how different sexual subjects may be produced through these mediated experiences given the privacy and anonymity that personal, mobile media afford. How did spatial mobility and sexual networks work off each other?

In December 2006 I conducted a study on how three young people in Mumbai use their mobile phones. One of them, a young woman who worked as cabin crew for an international airline, was particularly adept at using the mobile phone to manage multiple sexual relationships. She reported being able to project 'different identities' with each of her partners because of her constant mobility for her work, and because of her mobile phone. She said she felt 'liberated' as an Indian woman being able to have these different 'sexual sides' to herself, and there was never any risk of being caught and found out. Interestingly, she chose to take lovers who also led similarly mobile lives, and they were all White Europeans or Americans ('Indian men cannot deal with me being like this').

Her interactions led me to think of Kothis. Given that Kothis like everyone else have multi-layered personas, I wondered how they would manifest and experience different aspects of their sexuality and relationships with the privacy, anonymity and with heightened mobility offered by mobile phones.

1.4 Methodology

This paper is based on a short pilot project of in-depth interviews with six self-identified Kothis carried out between February and June 2009. This was supported by observations of and participation in weekly support group meetings. It was my intention to conduct a series of interviews and film these participants for the pilot of a participatory video filmmaking project. Unfortunately, this project has still not materialised. The Kothis are either

outreach workers employed by, or are members visiting a HIV prevention, care and support NGO and drop-in centre Amcha Ghar. They were all between the age of 18 and 30 years and are native Hindi, Urdu or Marathi speakers, and predominantly working class. All interview respondents mentioned in this paper are referred to by their feminine 'Kothi names', which they have given me permission to use. I use the lens of media consumption avoiding bio-medical discourses that frame Kothis primarily as 'high risk groups' to map as vectors of disease.

2 ICTs, development and intimate economies

Two discursive strands are woven together to circumscribe this paper. The first of these relates to ICT4D. There is a sense that ICT4D programmes are failing (Best 2010; Heeks 2008; Mobile Active 2009). A recent event by Mobile Active, an NGO that compiles information about 'mobile technology for social impact', called FailFaire invited entrepreneurs, ICT4D programmers and others working with mobile technologies to share their stories of failure, with the aim of learning how to use mobile phones more effectively. Clicking through the various stories of failure that were presented at the event, one of the most common recurring themes was that mobile-phone based ventures and social enterprises lacked enough fundamental research about the contexts they were being implemented in. There was little problematisation of who the people were in need of development, or how a phone could help them achieve it. This paper narrates a particular set of intimate economies that operate within the new media explosion in India despite the divides that exist. It is hoped that reading these economies may reveal something about the interior lives of the marginalised which can help ICT4D programmes more fully understand the effects of their programmes.

The second strand relates to Kothi sexuality and gender identity. 'Kothi identity' as a sexual identity category has been critically tested in studies of international development, anthropological sexuality studies and the political economy of the HIV/AIDs epidemic (Boyce 2007; Cohen 2005; Gosine 2006; Khanna 2007, 2009). Paul Boyce has been suspicious of the way in which the 'Kothi identity' quickly achieved absolute acceptance as a 'cultural category' of people at particular risk for HIV infection; he calls for sexuality research that 'offers a more cogent analysis' and a 'more nuanced conceptualisation' of how Kothis are 'social actors engaged in the changing circumstances of their sexual worlds' (2007: 198). Given my own history of association with this group, and responding to Boyce's questions, I was interested in exploring how 'Kothi-ness' is lived and produced through media objects and experiences.

In order to begin tying these disparate strands together, I consider how media and technologies are situated in public memory and in the contemporary moment, and the concurrent developments in the ICT4D field.

2.1 Media and technology in India: from control to consumption

Media and technologies have had a particular history of use, control and regulation in India. Nishant Shah discusses how the arrival of media technologies in India marks multiple points of tension (2006). The first of these is the State-imagined 'proper' uses of technologies for social empowerment and 'upliftment'; this is not a new idea. Under Indira Gandhi's leadership (1969–1984) Doordarshan (the national broadcast) was developed as a vehicle for national development through rural education and poverty alleviation projects.¹ Similarly, cinema has been a vehicle for social-political discourses, values and aspirations in India promoting 'appropriate' ideas of Nation and National Culture (Kasbekar 2002). The idea that the 'masses' who need uplifting (out of poverty) are vulnerable to moral corruption or being misled, much like children, is writ large across these uses and regulations of media.²

However digital media technologies cannot be controlled the way television and cinema are. This is a considerable source of concern for a State that is well aware of this, but nonetheless attempts to monitor online content. This is evident in that the raging public debates over cyberspace (and most forms of media in India) are to do with pornography, obscenity and the need to control the 'unabashed fantasies' that the internet is catering to (Shah 2007: 1). The recent filtering of the cartoon-pornography site 'Savita Bhabhi'³ is only the latest in a history of content filtering by the State. According to recently released reports from Google,⁴ between June and December 2009, the Government of India issued it 1,061 requests for data, and 142 requests for removal of data from its search facilities. The Indian government was also ranked third globally in requests and removals, behind Brazil and the United States. Thus, the State extends connectivity to its masses, but wants to retain control over media.

1 In 1975–76 India launched SITE, or Satellite Instructional Television, in 2,400 villages in five different states across the country. The goal of the SITE project was to 'stimulate national development in India', 'contribute to health, hygiene, and family planning, national integration, to improve agricultural practices, to contribute to general school and adult education, and improve occupational skills (in Kumar 2000). Therefore, SITE was instrumental in setting the political, economic and cultural agenda for the use of television for nation-building and development. This 'transmission' idea of development is uni-directional and does not take into account the local social and economic power structures, knowledge and cultures operating at the grassroots (Kumar and Thomas 2006: 307).

2 The ban on depicting kissing in Indian cinema for example was brought in to 'protect' Indians and Indian culture (in Kasbekar 2002: 290). The long history of censorship of 'obscene' content in film, print, advertising, art, song lyrics, television and now, on the internet, suggests that the State is highly concerned with the kind of content it's citizens are exposed to.

3 Savita Bhabhi is a cartoon pornography strip featuring the sexual adventures of a good, model Indian housewife with practically anyone who comes to her door, from the bra salesman to the boys playing cricket in the yard, her husband's cousins/brothers. In June 2009 the Government blocked access to this site from India citing reasons of displaying Indian womanhood in negative and demeaning light. Savita Bhabhi has now been made available on www.kirtu.com, first as a proxy site. Other forms of pornography flourish on the Indian internet however.

4 www.google.com/governmentrequests/

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 and the ideas of 'development' that followed it were hinged on a sort of utopian view of information technologies and telecommunications. IT jobs and exports were seen as crucial in constructing the idea of India as an economic superpower and global player, an idea which has come to be dear to the increasingly prosperous and aspirational middle class, and importantly, the State. So, from the socialist-reformist rhetoric of the upliftment and education of the masses, there was a shift to the 'knowledge economy'. Instead of developing public institutions for education and providing jobs, the buzz became 'e-literacy' and 'training' and 'computer skills'. But with the increased affordability and lowered costs of tariffs, digital media were not just about jobs and skills. These media have come to be deeply insinuated into urban India's everyday offering multiple opportunities for leisure, pleasure and consumption. Shah goes on to say that 'the emergence of internet technologies and new digital technologies of communication and transportation were signifiers of a certain economic mobility, globalised aesthetics of incessant consumption, [and] availability of lifestyle choices ...' (2006). Citing neoliberal values of commoditisation and consumption, Jonathon Lillie shows how media consumption is increasingly made synonymous with citizenship. To be connected to the global network is to 'participate'. In order to be productive the citizen is expected to consume (2005). Anxieties exist around how technologies are ripping the fabric of culture by collapsing the private and the public and changing lifestyle choices; these surface alongside a hearty consumption of media technologies for work, leisure and pleasure, and the State's desire to regulate content and reap benefits from technology industries.

2.2 ICT4D: origins, differences and criticisms

The neoliberal values Lillie cites spurred the architecture of an information society (and information economy) in India, as well as ICT4D. The latter was positioned as a business enterprise model to be rolled out through public-private partnerships (PPP) (Gurumurthy and Singh 2009). The State, eager to provide jobs, readily embraced all manner of ICTs and the economic opportunities they offered. ICTs for the development of the poor and the improvement of public infrastructure and services have become an industry in themselves. For example, eIndia 2009⁵ was billed as 'India's largest ICT event'. This convention unites application domains of ICT for Development – e-Government, ICT in Education, ICT and Rural Development, e-Agriculture and ICT enabled Health services. The conference is co-hosted by the German software company SAP and has Siemens as a 'platinum sponsor', alongside the 'silver sponsor' the mobile phone company Airtel, the Indian technology firm HCL (a 'gold sponsor'), numerous computer programming centres. It has the support of Information Technology (IT) and Telecommunications departments of the ministries of various Indian states. This includes one of the most developed IT states, Andhra Pradesh (of which the 'cybercity' Hyderabad is the capital), to the least developed, Uttar Pradesh.

5 See www.eindia.net.in/2009/abouteindia.asp

The present iteration of ICT4D has origins in a 1998 World Development Report from the World Bank that highlighted the role of information, knowledge, and ICT in development. The G8 countries created the Digital Opportunities Task Force in 2000 to set an agenda for action on ICT4D. And the World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005 acted as key learning and policy-formation points along the ICT4D path (Heeks 2008: 27). ICTs for Development are included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MDG 8 specifically includes ICTs as Target 18: to 'make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications'. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), a focus on 'mainstreaming ICTs will effectively contribute to achievement of the MDGs, particularly those related to income, poverty reduction, education, health, environment and gender equity through: creating economic opportunities and contributing to poverty reduction; managing the processes of providing basic services (e.g. healthcare, education) at lower cost and with greater coverage; facilitating access to information and the involvement of stakeholders through greater transparency and support to networking at every stage; and enhancing the capacity to measure, monitor and report progress on the goals and strategize' (quoted in Huyer and Mitter 2003: 9).

What does the 'D' in 'ICT4D' include and exclude? Are the measures of development rigorously interrogated from one MDG to another? What are the assumptions underlying how under-developed development subjects are? Scholars have discussed these points in their critiques of ICT4D. Reviews of ICT4D programmes consistently note that it is the people and not the technologies that need to be at the centre of programme design (Gigler 2004); that both the ICT discourse and the development discourse 'neglect the formation and circulation of knowledge in the socioeconomic, cultural and political power structure' (Schech 2002). This underlying current between technology developers and innovators, and social scientists who study the contexts of and people involved with development has also been discussed by Michael Best who calls for a greater immersion of ICT4D in multiple disciplines (2010). Susie Jolly (2006 and 2007) looks into how sexuality is connected with development and notes that the reticence of development practitioners to consider how sexuality is interwoven with development, beyond the absence of disease or violence, is now spurred by conservative backlashes that use content regulation and censorship to limit women's access to information through media. Henry Armas similarly explores linkages between 'traditional' areas of development and sexuality and shows how they are connected (2007).

Anita Gurumurthy and Parminder Singh claim that the 'real ICTD narratives' lie in the 'less captive and more movements-oriented spaces where voices of the poor and the disenfranchised exist'. The theme that they believe ties it all together is 'the communitisation of ICTs; not merely the consumption of ICTs and ICT based "services"' (2009). For development subjects, ICTs are expected to provide opportunities to leapfrog out of their information-poverty. Lawrence Liang (2009) proposes an entirely different view in discussing the CyberMohalla project, a series of media labs in working class colonies in Delhi. He says that ICTs are 'a serious redistribution of the means of thought and

expression'; and that if ICT4D were to look at the subjects of development as 'thinking beings' then this would change notions of equality and learning. An alternate view, Liang suggests, would be to 'think of the process of learning, not as a moving from ignorance to knowledge but as a process of going from what is already known or what is already possessed to further knowledge or new possessions.'

2.3 Digital divides

Issues of access to technologies are generally discussed under the rubric of the 'digital divide', a fundamental notion girding the application of ICTs for development. The enthusiasm about mobiles, the internet and their applications for development generally derives from the idea that the world is divided into 'information-haves' and 'have-nots', and that giving the have-nots access to technology will serve as a catalyst for economic and social development. ICTs are seen as an enabling infrastructure for progress within four of Amartya Sen's five developmental indicators: economic opportunities, political freedoms, social facilities and transparency guarantees (quoted in Thompson 2008: 822).

In 2005 the Digital Solidarity Fund was inaugurated to address 'the uneven distribution and use of new information and communication technologies' and to 'enable excluded people and countries to enter the new era of the information society' (quoted in Ginsburg 2008: 287). Yet the 'digital divide' discourse has been roundly criticised for how it: reproduces a model of development based on binary oppositions of the developed and under-developed through the category of the 'information poor'; is based on technological determinism and assumptions that technology is a neutral tool (Wilson 2002); presupposes that poor people in developing countries will skip industrialisation and leapfrog into the information age, that by merely plugging into a pre-existing pool of information/knowledge the poor will become enlightened; panders to narrow market-driven approaches to development that do not question global trade and political-economic inequalities (Leye 2009); and is under-girded by an unexamined ethnocentrism (Ginsburg 2008: 289). As Ginsburg goes on to say of the term 'digital divide':

... the term invokes neodevelopmentalist language that assumes that less privileged cultural enclaves with little or no access to digital resources – from the South Bronx to the global South – are simply waiting, endlessly, to catch up to the privileged West. Inevitably, the language suggests they are simply falling behind the current epicenter... (p290)

2.4 Mobile anxieties and possibilities

Most of urban India can seem like an overwhelming epicentre of media infiltration, and none more so than the city of Bombay. In 2008 almost 300 million Indians, or 25 per cent, owned a mobile phone as against the 42 million internet subscribers, and close to 10,000 mobile phones were sold every hour (Saxena 2008; Internews Europe 2008). The Telecom Regulatory Association

of India announced that by the end of 2009 there were 149 million mobile phone connections in the country (Medianama 2010). In the relatively short span of time that mobile telephony has become accessible in India, new media technologies have been established as a site of anxiety around the 'loosening' of adolescent (and particularly, female) sexuality, and implicated in fears around technology-enabled terrorist activity. This is evident through some recent events.

First, in 2004 two students of the much-venerated upper-class Delhi Public School in New Delhi used a mobile phone to film themselves frolicking intimately. The clip leaked out of the phone and raced around the country via MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service); it was eventually sold to Bazee dot com (an Indian affiliate of eBay dot com). The California-based Chief Executive Officer of Bazee was extradited to India, arrested, and after a protracted trial was convicted, and then released on appeal. The event generated a moral panic around adolescent sexuality and the erosion of cultural values; whether the girl involved in the MMS Scandal, as it was referred to later, was a 'desiring subject' was hardly debated, and 'new technologies' were vilified (Menon 2005).

Second, the internet, unsecured Wi-Fi connections and mobile phones have been linked to the *modus operandi* of terrorist groups responsible for attacks in Indian cities resulting in alarming headlines like 'is technology a toy in the hands of terrorists?' (CIOL 2008). In two instances in Bombay, Wi-Fi connections registered to an American national, and to a local college, were hacked by resistance groups who used them to send emails claiming responsibility for violent incidents in Gujarat (Singh 2008). Mobile phones are suspected to have been used as detonators in explosive devices (Kirpal 2006). Following violent incidents across the country in 2006–2008, intelligence agencies warned that these technologies need to be more carefully guarded and monitored. Wi-Fi connections are now expected to be password protected to prevent their misuse by 'terrorists'.

Mobile phones have also become something of a popular object of study in media and cultural studies (Donner 2007b) and are championed in ICT4D programmes (Heeks and Jagun 2007; Verclas 2008). Mobile telephony has been used in development programming for advocacy, campaigning, service delivery and information dissemination across areas of environmental conservation, banking and microfinance, public health, humanitarian assistance and health promotion; in electoral participation, democracy and governance; in conducting research; for crowd-sourcing; the mobilisation of communities; citizen media reporting; and for interventions in situations of domestic violence, forced migration and trafficking (Donner 2007a; Kinkade and Verclas 2008; Ramey 2008).

Recent writing around mobile phone use in India focuses on regulatory and industrial mechanisms that contribute to the growth of the mobile phones market and telecommunications industries (Kumar and Thomas 2006; Varadharajan 2007; Sridhar and Varadharajan 2006), or on poverty reduction and the economic impact of ICTs (Souter, Scott *et al.* 2007; Abraham 2006). There are also some notable ethnographic studies and quantitative research

that explore social and cultural dimensions of mobile phone use (Wei 2007; Kavoori *et al.* 2006; Desai 2009). Recent research on young people's mobile phone use from Asia suggest that it presents opportunities for young people in conservative societies to facilitate premarital romance, intimacy and sexual relationships and networks and negotiate traditional values (Humphreys and Barker 2007); and to inhabit the culturally hybrid spaces forged through a blurring of the local and the global (Wei 2007).

Yet the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) finds that 'sustained qualitative research into the access and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by poor people in the South is significantly absent in discussions of the digital divide, information inequality and poverty' (ISRG 2005). For this reason DFID supported research on 'Emergent Technologies and Development Communities' in South Africa, Ghana, India and Jamaica. One of these, Miller and Horst's study of mobile phone use in Jamaica, finds that the poorest people use mobile phones to strengthen social networks of immediate family and friends. They also use mobiles for 'link-up' (short calls averaging 19 seconds) to broader, more extensive social networks.

These calls sustain connections until a more specific reason for contact emerges: a visit, a problem, a request for money or information, or beginning a friendship or sexual relationship. These broad, shallow, technology-enabled networks are central to meeting financial, emotional, sexual and social needs.

(Miller 2007)

Similarly, Sebastien Ureta's work with low income families in Santiago's *campamentos* is a reminder that in the excitement around mobility and development, the 'promise of ubiquity' is stymied by structural limitations. Just having a phone does not necessarily accrue the benefits of mobility to the user, and Ureta says that attention must be paid to the 'diversity of elements related to the everyday life of individuals in urban societies'. Mobile freedom advertised as a benefit of the information age, the social mobility and 'arrival' it connotes is a contested space, a space of inequalities and exclusions, as much as physical spaces of the city can be. Their immobility and exclusion in concrete urban space have a parallel in the space of mobile phone communications' (2008: 86–7). Studies of this kind, that take a close look at communities' uses of technologies, can be valuable in thinking about how technology is neither apolitical nor value-free and how and why certain objects come to be installed in development programmes.

2.5 Medias and intimate economies

Larissa Hjorth's research in Japan, China and Korea are particularly absorbing ethnographies of mobile phone use for how they discuss intimate and moral economies, themes that have featured in other work in Asian contexts (see Wilson 2004; Bell 2005 cited in Hjorth 2009). Moral and intimate economies are a way to analyse interactions between economic systems and social relationships, the 'intimate' and the 'social' in daily lives being usually

considered non-economic. Moral economies are based on the exchanges of intangible, mutual belief systems, usually in close-knit communities.

Recognising plural economies operating in a society challenges the idea that the 'private' is separate from the formal-economic realm.

Critical social theory suggests that social life is not separate from, but linked with, economic affairs. Just as intimate life (e.g., gender identities, sexual relationships, and ethnic ties) crosses into the public arena of markets and jobs, those public realms profoundly affect people's private interactions and self conceptions... By intimate economies, then, I mean the complex interplay between these intimate social dimensions and plural economic systems in a context shaped by transnational capitalism.

(Wilson 2004: 11)

Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch have written about moral economies in the context of how communications technologies have an impact on the social, economic and cultural order of the domestic household. Their work explores how media objects regulate gender and gender roles in the household, contribute to personal and national identity and organise time, space and leisure (1992: 14–15). Behind visible monetary and economic transactions lie an entire living, breathing system of symbolic, intangible beliefs and exchanges. These determine the biographies of ideas about media objects as well as biographies of the objects themselves (after Kopytoff 1986). The concept of the moral economy may rely on money but is also contingent on social values and expectations. The logic of kin, folk and moral economies are not necessarily governed by profit but by the need to maintain relationships with family, social acquaintances, community and so on.

In countries like the Philippines, for example, one of the mainstays of the domestic economy – women workers abroad – is being sustained in a novel way by the emergence of the mobile phone, which allows women workers to produce particular forms of intimacy and interpersonal relationships that did not exist before (Hjorth 2009: 22). Filipino and Filipina migrant workers around the world often retain their local home SIM cards so that their families can text them at local rates (Internews 2008: 21). Sex work is also a good example of how moral, emotional, sexual and capitalist, economic systems operate simultaneously. Mowlabocus' notion of the erotic economy is a version of this, where the mobile phone produces the affective elements of the economy through messages, photos, videos and phone numbers. These exchanges have value in determining desirability, sexual, economic and other forms of access to 'centres' of power, and can create their own discourses of sexual identity, desire and speech (personal communication).

This paper examines these issues how Kothis use mobile phones, and its meanings and implications for ICT4D.

3 Who are Kothis?

Kothis are biological males represented in HIV/AIDS discourse under the broad umbrella category of MSM (Men who have Sex with Men, or Males who have Sex with Males). They refer to themselves as wives or girlfriends to their male partners, as sisters, aunts, mothers and girlfriends to other Kothis, and as husbands and fathers to their wives and children. Kothis are thought to be 'passive' recipients of anal sex with their male/masculine partners called Panthis or Pareekhs. Panthis are known as such only by Kothis, meaning that Panthis do not identify themselves in this way. Effectively, this means that *any* man could be a Panthi that a Kothi desires. Many Kothis are married with children while simultaneously desiring and accessing sexual, sensual and erotic spaces with men.

Salim, a casual attendee of the support group meetings at Amcha Ghar introduces another category by talking about himself. 'I am a man who has the guts to be a man and the guts to be a Kothi. I am a Panthi with women and with Kothis, and a Kothi with Panthis.' Salim is what many within the MSM fold would call a 'double-decker' or 'do-paratha'. A 'classic' double-decker attracts both Kothis and Panthis, is both penetrator and penetrated, is more straight-acting and does not cross-dress or display effeminate personal styles and mannerisms like Kothis do.

Kothi gender and sexuality is largely constructed in terms of the act of being penetrated and this is evident from conversations between Kothis, of 'giving' and 'receiving'. This determines who a Kothi, Panthi or double-decker is, even though there are many Kothis who switch between these roles as Salim indicates. Based on observations of support group meetings, and Kothis' self-representation, discussions about Kothi sexuality tend to centre on the opportunities for and experiences of sex with Panthis. These discussions are also a vehicle for the expression of emotional ties and relationships between Kothis – friendship, care, support, encouragement, competition, aggression and jealousy, amongst others. From their banter it appears that part of being a Kothi is based on constant articulations of sexual willingness, desire and hunger.

There are also of course other dimensions to Kothis' relationships, particularly those with their wives, long term lovers and children. Some Kothis have long-term relationships with Panthis. Within this context love, romance, marriage and relationship stability are wistfully spoken of. There is a desire to be regarded as the wife or long-term girlfriend. Even if Panthis do regard them as long-term companions, not being the socially recognised 'wife' is a point of some poignant distress for *ariyal* (meaning 'hard-core' extremely stylised feminine) Kothis.

For many Kothis the full force of their femininity has to be reserved for intimate parties, support-group meetings and other such spaces, considering that they have to pass for straight with families and in jobs that will not give them the space to express themselves. The programme coordinator of the NGO Amcha Ghar says that Kothis are 'all about display' and the point of this display is to

attract Panthis or double-deckers. Dressing up, performing a dramatic femininity, a fondness for dance, exhibitionism and hedonism form the most general and visible aspects of Kothi identity, although it is not possible to generalise this even to the group I have been talking to.

Until recently Kothis' sexual behaviour was criminalised under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). This section of the IPC criminalised consensual same-sex sex and makes Kothis vulnerable to stigmatisation, violence, harassment, extortion and human rights abuses by the police and by extension, the State. In what is a historic event, on 2 July 2009, the Delhi High Court decriminalised private consensual same-sex activity, thereby overturning a 190 year old colonial law that penalised homosexuality.

3.1 What?! There are no Kothis?!

There has been some controversy about the role of NGOs in developing Kothi identities. The Kothi identity began to receive attention within queer-activist and public health discourses in the 1990s as the HIV epidemic in India began to grow. Kothis' increased risk for infection, owing to the levels of unsafe anal sex they are thought to be engaged in, became the dominant register of discussions. Over the past 15 years organisations representing Kothis in major Indian cities and in small towns have been formed, resulting in a significant sense of community and voice as evidenced through these NGO-centred groups. These NGOs receive funding for conducting HIV prevention programmes with Kothis.

The Naz Foundation International (NFI) has been central in reifying Kothis as a separate identity category within the MSM umbrella. The MSM rubric has been promoted by groups like NFI to resist the Euro-centric, masculine, white, gay and English-speaking identity that they believe has little purchase in non-Western parts of the world. According to Andil Gosine, 'MSM... refused the attachment of identities to disease, and focused attention on sexual acts... [it] provided a way to speak about safe sex practices without committing clients to fixed and culturally specific identities ("gay", "bisexual", etc.)' (2006: 2). The terms Kothi and MSM were seen as direct challenges to the hegemonic grip of Western-centric Gay identities. Yet, MSM has now lost some of the vigour in the 'challenges it posed to the authority of the West' (*ibid.*: 3) as it has become quickly integrated into international development as a 'category'. The work of NFI has also brought it into direct conflict with the other big network in India working on sexuality rights: the Humsafar Trust in Bombay. Humsafar generally stands by the 'gay' identity even as it works with transgender and Hijra (a South Asian transgender identity) people in their human rights and HIV prevention, care and support work (in Boyce 2007: 183).

As organisations and programmes on HIV prevention with Kothi communities were seeded across the country, there were others who began to question the emergence of the term. Writers such as Lawrence Cohen, Paul Boyce and Andil Gosine have highlighted the slippery origins of this identity by pointing to the specific political economies and sociocultural forces around the evolution of the HIV/AIDS industry, which have given prominence to this term, rather than

the term being indigent to South Asia or India. It has been named by HIV/AIDS prevention programmes as *the* way in which passive men have sex with other men; yet despite having lived and worked with same-sex desiring men in India for decades, Cohen says that he never previously came across this term (2005: 285). Boyce finds that essentialised descriptions of Kothis as vulnerable to HIV infection, and being feminine and passive have become lodged in HIV/AIDS prevention discourses, with little else known about their sexual subjectivities. Moreover, he suggests that the reductive, positivist positioning of Kothis, and descriptions in derivative anthropological work of faulty methodology, have dovetailed neatly with HIV prevention programmes' biomedical approaches (2007). Andil Gosine has similarly unpackaged the NFI construction of Kothis and MSM showing how it is problematic for it 'appears to be informed by colonial-imperialist notions of sexuality and 'race', and may work to reify sexual identities and marginalise women' (2006: 8)

This paper is not positioned to test the construction of Kothis, but instead, to take up some of the directions suggested in being able to explore Kothis' personal and sexual worlds more expansively. This paper does not challenge self-identified Kothis' use of this term to name themselves; instead, I will continue to use the term to refer to them, and at times the term MSM where relevant. Having said that, it is certainly possible the existing constructions of Kothi-ness have conditioned both myself and Kothis themselves, further replicating existing definitions. Nonetheless, this paper constitutes an effort to frame Kothis more expansively and deeply than what the HIV/AIDS discourse has engineered.

4 What Kothis do with their phones

4.1 Mobiles, consumption and social mobility

The mobile phone is perceived as an announcement of one's social status and social capital. Being noticed on the basis of one's phone creates the potential for finding a wealthy, socially powerful partner, or being perceived in that way oneself. How the phone looks, its efficiency and range of features is considered more important to Kothis than the brand of the phone itself.

I was saying that it is important to be seen with a good phone, both for Kothis and Panthis. You can identify the value of the partner by the phone, you know that he is rich and has money to spend if he has a better phone. Today Kothis are looking for rich Panthis. But actually Kothis and Panthis are the same... both are looking for a partner who can make their dreams and wishes come true.

(Ismail)

Ismail shows me his new phone and says coyly that his boyfriend bought him the phone. I want to know what brand it is, but Ismail doesn't know. What

matters is that he has a shiny dual-SIM phone. 'I wanted a more expensive phone but he said that this would do for now' he says, a little forlorn.

The topography of what constitutes an urban self-articulated MSM and queer space is changing, says Aditya Bondyopadhyay, a human rights lawyer who has worked with Kothi NGOs and collectives across the country. With an increasing influx of rural, non-English-speaking young Kothis into urban areas, often in unstable work and/or sex work, with limited education, they find that they can be desirable to men through a certain lexicon of self-presentation and sexualisation. Men who want to have sex with them are a potential market for a variety of needs; to display themselves to potential Panthis they go to discos, parties and night-clubs organised exclusively by and for same sex desiring men. These spaces are, by their very location in upscale pubs and bars, indicative of a higher social class, but they allow for a mingling of queer men across a full class and age spectrum since rates for drinks are less than what they would normally be, given that men's parties attract large numbers.

The right clothes and the right phone are perceived as entry passes into this world. However, the phone is a symbol of more than just the sex that its owner can promise, it is possibly about an entire experience in social mobility, and this operates equally for how Kothis advertise themselves and in how they perceive Panthis. This translates into how sexually attractive or viable a Kothi (or Panthi) is considered to be. Batson-Savage's study of how sexuality and gender dynamics play out between men and women cellphone users in Jamaica mirrors this, finding that notions of masculinity are closely tied in with a better-looking phone: a man with the right phone is assumed to be a lover who could take care of a woman both sexually and materially (2007).

There is a young generation that has very strict ideas about gender, coming as they do from fairly traditional rural backgrounds in the hinterland. I think what is important for them is to achieve a kind of cosmopolitanism that they associate with 'the rich'. To the Kothi who wants to 'make it' in these spaces, who wants to get the upper class Panthi and who wants to be noticed, he has to have something to make him look less like where he comes from. Or at least that is what he thinks. He thinks that to get sex with the best Panthi, to have status, he has to be seen wearing the right clothes and carrying the right phone. Now, I am not sure what 'right' is but I know that it is expensive.

(Aditya Bondyopadhyay)

The mobile phone is a key figure in a tension between display and anonymity. Kothis talk about watching each other (and phones in particular) to assess the extent of competition for a pool of Panthis. This results in a curious paradox. On the one hand there is a desire to be seen and noticed by other Kothis and Panthis, but at the same time Kothis spend a considerable amount of energy being un-seen and having to hide parts of their identities away from the gaze of family and society.

In the present moment of growing middle class consumer culture, advertising plays a significant role in creating what Shilpa Phadke refers to as the 'aspirationality of social status' (2005: 69). In this, advertising is no longer

about the utility of a product but creates a flurry of images that signal how rich, enviable or sexy products will make you (feel). She goes on to say that this 'sensual experience' of middle class consumerism has an equal effect on working class people who decode advertisements, and encode themselves in the process, with the aspiration to a higher class membership (p70). Thus the mobile phone is part of the packaged idea of attractiveness and personal 'success' based on 'energetic consumption'.

4.2 Ismail's story

Ismail's story presents a perspective on mobility that illustrates what I refer to as a 'caste system' within the constructions of sexuality based on identity categories, being attributed different grades of power and agency. By this I refer not only to a system that reflects social divisions and hierarchies, but also to the desire to move through the system to the top; consumption and consumerism are part of this mobility through the caste system in the manner that Phadke discusses. Additionally, there is, I believe, a sense of futility associated with the desire for social mobility, or that it happens only for a select lucky – or cunning – few.

Many months after I had interviewed Ismail talking about his phone use, he arrived in the Amcha Ghar office while I was interviewing some others. Ismail is 19 years old and one of the youngest outreach workers at Amcha Ghar. One of the older members was telling me why he doesn't participate in the local Mumbai Pride march. Mid-sentence he stopped, for he saw Ismail. It was the start of the monsoon in Bombay and Ismail was drenched. He was drying off and unrolling his trouser-legs that he had neatly rolled up to protect the bottoms from the inches-high water. We all turned to watch; there was something very absorbing in how Ismail publicly and precisely dried off from the rain. Standing in front of a mirror and adjusting his hair back into its peaked coif, he then carefully unrolled and then re-rolled his shirt sleeves. He observed himself critically in the mirror, patted his cheeks, turned to look at himself from different angles. Seeing this, the older person called out loudly and coarsely, 'Oi, Kothi, come here and tell this woman why you aren't a Kothi!'

It turns out that Ismail wants to be gay, and one way he does this is to *think* he is gay, and to dress and carry himself that way. That's why he says he always wears smart, preppy shirts and the only concession to femininity is the faint trace of *surma* (eyeliner; it is not uncommon for Muslim men of many classes and identities to wear *surma*). I ask Ismail what he thinks will make him gay and what the benefits are. '*Bade bade logon se milna, ameer hona, acche kapde pehenena, acche restaurants aur disco mein jaana*' (to meet high-class and important people, to be rich, to wear good clothes, to go to good restaurants and discos) he says without any self consciousness or hesitation. A part of me does not believe I am hearing this, something that sounds to my middle class ears, so very politically incorrect, that Ismail is so very clear that gayness is equated with material and social access. It reminds me of how Oliver Philips discusses the phenomenon of the 'Global Gay' (2000) and what Joseph Massad refers to as the 'Gay International' (2002).

‘*Tu kabhi gay nahin banegi*’ (you will never become gay) ‘*tu zindagi bhar kothi rahegi*’ (you will be a Kothi your whole life) is what the others say. To the older members of the group Ismail is a joke because in being so aspirational, in wanting to escape being a Kothi through clothes, phones and a rich lover, he is actually reinforcing his own inferior position. There is even perhaps some jealousy I detect. I wonder if this is also a sign of the times and is reflective of how many young people in India feel. The better car, the better phone, the better washing machine are constructed at offering the consumer the chance for social mobility. ‘That’s why I also want my boyfriend to get me a good phone’ Ismail says finally, referring to an earlier conversation we had about the branding of phones, ‘then people will think I am gay. Then he [it?] will make my dreams come true.’

The project coordinator of Amcha Ghar explains the caste system to me as he sees it:

*Gay groups rarely come out in support of Kothi issues and being middle class, upper middle class, they are richer, better educated, have good jobs. Of course everyone wants to be gay. There are three levels in this – gay at the top, Kothi in the middle and Hijra⁶ at the bottom. You never see anyone actually moving up though everyone wants to. You never see a gay man saying that he wants to become a Hijra but you see Kothis becoming Hijras. There is this famous Hijra [...] but everyone knows she is nakli [false]. She herself has said to me that she will never cut off her penis because that is her power. She said to me ‘there is no way I can become gay if become nirvaan [to undergo castration].’ See, this has been the norm for so long. I can remember when I was younger and used to cruise that the lines were clearly drawn. Bandra was for gay men to cruise and Dadar was for Kothis. Once we got a gay man cruising in Dadar and we hounded him back to Bandra. ‘Stay there mother****r, otherwise I’ll make a Kothi out of you’ I said to him.*

Ismail’s story leaves me with a sense that identity categories are so deeply ingrained in how Kothis (and perhaps many of us) think of themselves and their place in this universe of sexual and identity politics. Identities are also mapped across the occupation of public spaces and read through objects, clothing and personal style. Identities can also be negotiated, masked and subverted fairly easily therefore, stripped of any political connotations and transposed into the realm of fetishised commodities and urban experiences.

4.3 Mobile sexual behaviour

Mobile phone numbers are a form of currency. A cache of mobile numbers implies connectivity to wider networks, even if that includes strangers whose numbers are randomly acquired. Talking to a stranger generates anticipation

6 Hijra – a south asian working class transgender identity, usually a person born male who takes the role of a woman or transgender person, which may involve various kinds of body modification.

about what contact will result in: a friendly conversation, phone sex or enough chemistry to meet offline for sex. The Kothi with more mobile numbers, therefore, has the (theoretical) potential to access more sex with more people.

A number is a contact, a contact is someone who could be a sex partner. Everyone wants numbers... you never know who is waiting for you on the other end. Kothis give out numbers all the time, and want to look at each other's phones and pick up numbers.

(Rameeza)

Numbers are also picked up from public locations such as the walls of public toilets and trains. For example, it has become easy to establish contact with someone met in a hurried moment of travel by exchanging numbers and then following it up with a phone call or by SMS to see if it could fructify into a friendship or a sexual encounter. This currency of numbers and 'blind' contacts is seen in other parts of the world too. Three different sets of studies from the Philippines note that 'text messaging helps Filipinos expand social networks (through blind solicitations to intentionally wrong numbers) and control their communication (and romantic) agendas, enabling new, rich, flirtatious dialogs' (cited in Donner 2007b: 154). Thus the mobile phone has increased the reach that a single Kothi has to access sex, and changes the spaces available for sex.

Any time after 6 in the evening if you go into the space between the first class and general coaches you have to make your way through men having sex. There used to be a vestibule there that was the best place to pick up someone and have quick sex. Now with these fancy new coaches that vestibule area has gone. Thank god we have got mobile phones and Bluetooth and the internet!

(Mona)

Mona talks about how the writing on toilet walls has changed so much since he was a teenager looking for men.

*First you would see things like a crude drawing of a vagina with a penis going into it and the words 'I f****d Seema... Seema's child is mine'. Nowadays you see drawings of an anus and a large penis going into it with the words 'I like to be f****d by homos... If you want homosex call me at this number... but note, only seven inchers need call'.*

Kothis who have access to the internet (usually through cyber-cafes) follow up on contacts made via the mobile phone through internet chatting.

Sometimes online is better, then you can actually see the person, do some chatting, and then see if you want to move on to chaating [oral sex]. You don't have to spend money to go and meet the Panthi only to find that he is not good looking or is too difficult to handle. You can assess all that online easily.

(Mona)

The opportunity to download and share pornography on-the go is another common use of the mobile phone. It is for this reason that a Bluetooth enabled phone is considered 'essential' for some Kothis. Bluetooth puts Kothis who want to cruise for sex in touch with similarly Bluetooth-ed Panthis. What had to be done at night, in the dark, now happens more casually. Kothis have always had to use such public spaces for sex since many do not have private spaces of their own; they live with parents, siblings, wives and children, and some live with all of these. The profusion of new hang-out places in urban India such as shopping malls, restaurants, coffee bars such as Café Coffee Day and Barista, and even McDonalds, allow classes and genders to mix more freely, and in the case of Kothis, cruise for sex, love, friendship, chatting, and 'chilling'. Bluetooth in these spaces is perfect for random meetings. However, as Mona notes 'Kothis will survive on old ways of cruising in these places.'

The act of downloading pornography to get potential partners excited is popular, as is the act of filming oneself having sex with a Panthi. The latter is not something to be widely circulated, but is used as yet another marker of social status. Showing other Kothis how attractive one's Panthi is, how long his penis is or how enjoyable the sex was, creates jealousy and competitiveness as well as an opportunity to share, bond and laugh. In Kashish's experience being able to show a prospective partner some sexy clips gives him a foot in the door, so to speak, and allows him to feel more confident about picking up men.

I keep all these clips on the phone. Sometimes I'm on a train going somewhere and I see someone I like, or someone starts talking to me. I can start by showing clips of film songs, old Hindi film music or the latest hits. Some people like adventure and action clips, like stunts. But BP is the most popular. This is our code-word.... These are blue film clips. We refer to it as BP, like Bhurji Pao⁷... things like that. If I like him then I can show him some clips and even if he didn't want to have sex with me, after seeing those clips he will become ready...

(Kashish)

Where once physical cruising was fraught with risks of violence from the police or violent competition with other male sex workers, the mobile phone now allows Kothis to cruise via Bluetooth and SMS without as many attendant risks. Salim talks of the live-ness that now permeates paid-sex; public cruising areas are scanned and evaluated for their 'ripeness' and the absence of competition from other sexual groups vying for the same pool of Panthi clients, primarily Hijras and TGs (transgenders). Kothis relay information about cruising locations through codes involving missed calls and SMSes. Thus mobile phones allow casual part-time sex-workers like Salim to organise and run small-scale sex work arrangements from within her home by putting Kothis and clients in touch with each other, and in conveying information about cruising

7 Bhurji Pao is actually an innocuous word; it refers to the local version of bread and masala scrambled eggs popular on Bombay's streets.

locations to Kothi networks. Such enhancement of business is not a new feature of mobile telephony and is in fact commonly seen across a range of professions (Abraham 2006; Iype 2003).

With the mobile phone the sexualisation of public spaces takes on a different dimension, as does the nature of sex itself.

I was standing at a bus-stop in talking to a Panthi who got my number through someone. I started to get very aroused and excited when he was talking about meeting me and how we would have sex... we were both getting aroused actually. So it continued for some time but then I couldn't take it anymore. I found a public urinal close by and went in to masturbate. Thankfully I found someone there who also wanted to have sex. It was a relief.

(Bobby)

As Bobby reveals, the acts, stages and phases of sex are broken down into component parts and enacted with different people, in different spaces, as a series of fragmented acts. In the context of how Kothis' 'do' their sexuality, there is a deep and constant pull-push between how the phone fragments sexuality into component acts, and how the existing construction of sex as a series of acts is readily replayed through the nature of mobile phone spaces. This is not restricted to Kothi sex alone however. Bobby's use of public space, (while distinctly male in an Indian-male sort of way that is quite comfortable taking up public space), is exactly what someone like him would be harassed for if he was having offline foreplay in that bus-stop. Being sexual on the phone in this disembodied way relieves Bobby of the possibility of assault for transgressing social norms. In one sense mobile phone sex in public resists and challenges the order expected in public spaces and of bodies in those spaces (see Offord 2003; Phadke 2005).

Fleeting, fast, unexpected, transient sexual experiences are much sought after possibly for the 'allure of the spontaneous', as Sharif Mowlabocus finds in his exploration of the online cyber-cottage⁸ (2008: 422). This allure refers to Pat Califia's notion of the erotic value of such experiences being heightened precisely because of their unexpectedness, which the mobility that is inherent to this technology makes possible. Miller's and Horst's ethnography of mobile phone use in Jamaica finds a similar dynamic operating, where extensive phone-based networks are used to establish sexual liaisons (2005: 758)

The exchanges described in this section are all indicative of what Mowlabocus refers to as an 'erotic economy'. The 'currencies' of this erotic economy are both telephone numbers as well as the affective element of text messages, photos, dialogues, videos and pornography; these currencies can be exchanged for intimacies and interactions from chatting and friendship to sex and sex-work. Interestingly, Ismail's and Mona's exchanges neatly tie in with the other form of currency – perhaps the ultimate form of currency – that

8 'Cottage' is British slang for lavatories as a place for gay sex.

remains powerful and popular across 'old' and 'new' ways of enjoying sex – penis size. This old currency remains the mystical 'big fish' story it always was; yet, while there can now be proof and evidence of how big the fish was, even that can be faked, morphed and tampered with. Collecting currencies, saving, trading and sharing them within these erotic economies are ways in which Kothis manoeuvre their position within their own social hierarchies. This economy is somewhat different to a mere counting of partners, which Kothis are also known to do, that is, rattling off the numbers (and sometimes the names) of men they've seduced. Kothis' possession of these currencies give them power within their own social networks.

Through these erotic exchanges a fixed 'knowing' of who or what Kothi identity is gets shaken up, and the flows of desire and bodies through nodes and networks appear to take on a greater dynamism. In a sense the mobile phone *produces* this erotic economy. But this is hardly a deterministic function; it appears that Kothis *appropriate* the functions of the phone to create this economy in an entirely unique way.

4.4 Mobile love

Mobile phones allow for the easy management of relationships with parents, wives and family members through the use of multiple SIM cards. For this reason Chinese-made unbranded phones with dual SIM cards and with Bluetooth connectivity are popular. Ismail tells me that there are two things about Chinese phones that make them popular. First they are very cheap. Second, more important, is that they can take two SIM cards: one for the family and the other for Kothis, Panthis, other 'personal numbers'.

An interesting aside to the use of the dual-SIM phone came to light very soon after these interviews were conducted. The government of India has banned the sale, import and use of dual-SIM card phones citing reasons of 'national security' shortly after the 26 November 2008 attacks in Bombay. Chinese-made phones that are thought to be used by terrorists since they do not come with a unique International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number, a code embedded into each phone that allows it to be tracked and monitored. These phones, many of which carry dual SIM cards, assign one IMEI number to 100 or 1000 phones making them popular, and impossible to track (*Times of India* 2008). This has political implications at many levels. Not only is the ban of these phones going to now make it difficult for Kothis to manage their multiple identities, but this phone is also used by a number of poor people who cannot afford the high end mobile phones.

With many Kothis interviewed here being married with children, often living with parents or in-laws, mobile phones equals anonymity and escape. Hiding away one's life as a Kothi becomes even easier. Participants say, 'It's easier to lie with a mobile phone... you don't have to look anyone in the eye and lie.' So a weekend tryst with a Panthi-lover can be easily passed off as 'workshop in Pune'. Salim talks about how he once spent a weekend with a Panthi at a

*mujra*⁹ at a housing estate behind the shanties where his wife and children live, but said that he was in Kolhapur, which is an overnight train journey away.

Being mobile gives Kothis a sense of privacy, even in public, that they rarely enjoy in their homes or work spaces. This sense of privacy allows for something elusive to present itself – romance, love and long-term relationships. The opportunity for intimate relationships introduces a new dynamic to erotic spaces where sex is not always the purpose of communication. As mentioned before, the access to coffee bars and malls and McDonalds restaurants are equally implicated in creating new spaces where young people can meet and hang out, resulting in entirely new forms of opposite-sex and same-sex socialising, romance and talk. Of course, none of the Kothis I talked to here hung out in these places regularly except when they were expressly looking for sex. Yet, they all mentioned it as a place for ‘other’ (read, with more disposable income) people to hang out.

4.5 Rameeza’s story

It’s not uncommon to think that life becomes depersonalised and fragmented and interactions fleeting in the age of technology. With Kothis, however, the pattern can be reversed. Rameeza describes a relationship that she had with a stranger met fleetingly on a train four years ago.

There were just three stops before I was to get off and I had noticed him looking at me. He made the first move by asking me about my phone; he said he had never seen a dual SIM card phone before. We quickly exchanged numbers because my stop was approaching. That very night we started chatting.

That’s how it all started. When he would call me he would talk for at least half an hour or 45 minutes, even asking me very mundane everyday questions like where I had been, what I had for lunch... And whether he was attractive to me. And I used to ask him what he found attractive. Our relationship grew so deep through the phone, we got so close just by talking! He would send me really sweet messages... they were actually messages of love. We had somehow fallen in love...

When we started our relationship I never knew where the time went. It wouldn’t seem like an hour, I had no idea where the time went. The battery would die out and we wouldn’t realise it, the phone would heat up, and we would have to stop talking for a while. It was so important for me to have that space with him. I couldn’t sleep without talking to him. And it still remains that way. I need the phone.

When I first met Rameeza in the group meeting his eyes lit up when I started talking about mobile phones and what I was hoping to do, and I could tell that

9 Traditionally, a dance performance by courtesans and women dancers that takes place over many hours, even days. The *mujra* connotes large groups of men, a few dancers and intoxication.

he was itching to say something. He was the first person to speak when I had finished and said, mysteriously, 'I have some very interesting stories for you... I think you will like my stories'.

Aside from the long-term relationship with a male lover over the phone, Rameeza has an equally intense relationship with his wife who I will refer to as Bilqis. Rameeza is 27 years old, his wife Bilqis is 24 and they have two small children, a boy and a girl, aged seven and four. When I first interviewed Rameeza he told me about his family, showed me pictures of his children and how he manages being attracted to men while being married to a woman. 'These are separate things... can't a married person also fall in love with someone else? Just because you're married in society's eyes it doesn't mean that all your other desires are switched off or that they can be fulfilled by just one other person.'

Does he have to mask his femininity with effort in front of his wife? He replies, 'well, I have a lot of practice now, I've been doing this since I was a teenager... walking straight, not using my hands, lowering my voice and being stern and aloof. I don't have to think about it now, it just happens automatically at home.' As she describes this verbally, she starts showing me, physically, what she means. Rameeza, languorous, becomes someone who is a 'man'. I start giggling and say that I cannot imagine Rameeza being the patriarch. 'Of course I am, my kids are terrified of me and my wife listens to me... I am the man of the house!!' The interaction reveals for a moment the other Rameeza, someone who doesn't take a female name, a man with power and control who everyone listened to. This male-ness reserved for family has been discussed in a report by Naz Foundation International as a 'situational identity' (2004: 4).

During the conversation I notice that Rameeza is constantly receiving calls, sometimes up to two or three calls a minute, all of which are missed calls, that is, calls that are not meant to be picked up and are often indications of something else. 'Missed calling' is a well-known globally prevalent adoption and appropriation of the phone's function to convey a range of communications as Donner finds in his review of mobile phone studies (2007b: 154–5). Rameeza apologises every time he receives a missed call, but I don't mind. This is one of those interviews where phones don't need to be in silent mode or switched off since I am interested in everything people do with their phones. Every time there's a call, he hits a button to end the call when he recognises the number, and smiles at the phone.

I continue to ask Rameeza about his relationship with Bilqis and it emerges that they are very good friends. They watch a lot of TV together in their free time and he uses these spaces to talk to her about effeminate men and same sex sexualities ('I am an outreach worker after all... and I want her to understand what I do... she laughs at it though'). When Bobby Darling, an actor who plays over-the-top camp characters in Bollywood and is inevitably the butt of jokes, comes on screen, Rameeza tries to insert his perspective on femininity saying that people should be allowed to 'express themselves' any way they want to, and that it's not a crime or a sin for a man to be a bit like a woman. Similarly, the recent film *Dostana* (Karan Johar 2008) which they got a pirated copy of, was another opportunity to talk about gay relationships.¹⁰ Bilqis just

giggles, but Rameeza thinks that he is making some headway with her on this point.

Some weeks later I am filming Rameeza talking about his relationship with his male lovers. He refers back to the long-distance long-term phone relationship.

We moved from the phone to the internet. There is a cyber café near my house and I know the guy who runs it, so I can go in late at night and stay there for as long as I want to. We made a plan to go away for a weekend. I said that I had work in Pune, but actually we went to Matheran. We enjoyed ourselves. We went for walks, we ate good food, drank a lot... we had sex too.

Rameeza is so animated talking about his male lover and their mobile phone relationship that he exclaims, in broken English:

There are so many ways to do things on the phone to show your love for someone. Mobile love videos... they are best, they make me feel healthy!

I find this amusing for reasons I cannot entirely explain to Rameeza. The notion of 'health' I am so used to hearing about in a development context is so far removed from how Rameeza uses the same word. I cannot help but think that this kind of emotional, personal, sexual 'health' that Rameeza talks of is difficult to appreciate in health programmes for men.

Again during this interview, he gets missed calls. Again, I let it pass because I think it is essential to allow for moments like this in a conversation about phones. In the middle we stop filming so he can take the call. Rameeza was on the phone for a while and returned smiling. The interview continued. He talks about the sad end to his mobile relationship with his lover; it happened when his partner discovered that Rameeza was married, and this became a barrier they couldn't get beyond. Then abruptly Rameeza switches topics and starts talking about his wife and family.

I love my wife so much and she loves me. I can't live without her and she can't live without me. She is a lovely person, a real friend. You know, all those missed calls I get when we're talking... that's her. She has a special signal for me. Whenever she is thinking of me or whenever she misses me, she gives me a missed call. I feel good knowing she is thinking about me. She gives me about 15 or 20 missed calls a day. Of course, it's not as if she doesn't have anything else to do all... if she needs something she messages me to call her back.

There is something unexpectedly overwhelming about this story because of how it allows me to see Rameeza in so many different roles and relationships. Clearly, Rameeza has a deep bond of friendship and love with Bilqis that

10 In *Dostana* the two male leads (played by two very popular and very attractive Bollywood leading men) pretend to be gay in order to avoid being married off by their families. This is a first for Hindi cinema and the film was appreciated by queer and straight audiences alike. Eventually though, it comes out that the two men are actually straight.

coexists with the control he may have over her as the head of the household. This lies with his desire for men, which introduces a poignant complexity to the 'standard' reading of Kothi sexuality in terms of 'active' and 'passive'. In fact, Rameeza's story reiterates that we love and desire and experience pleasure in amorphous, multiple, unfixed ways, that these things are not clear-cut and categorical, that they are sometimes messy but can also fulfil.

The emotional and interpersonal dynamics Kothis employ to navigate situations where they have different types of power and agency, and how this makes up their identities, requires more focused research and exploration. Moreover, how do the effects of conditioning a man receives in heteronormative masculinity change, as he 'becomes' a Kothi and remains a husband? Bilqis' use of the missed call reveals an aspect of her relationship with Rameeza that muddles the notion of who the Kothi is as much as it does the idea of who a husband is, or what the mobile phone is. The place of the phone in making both relationships possible, and meaningful in the present context, cannot be understated.

4.6 Online/offline harm

I can't tell you how dangerous the phone is for Kothis. I never use MMS (multimedia messaging service). There's too much of a risk of blackmail and harassment. I use the phone only for calls.

(Salim)

Kothis tend to talk about the phone ruefully, that it provides so many new opportunities for sex and relationships, but equally that it can be a vehicle for violence and abuse. Photographs, videos and text messages saved on mobile phones are a prime source of evidence for the police and vengeful partners to blackmail and harass Kothis with. Kothis talk of having to delete messages and photographs (including pornography) that could be damning if revealed to family members or regular partners who imagine sexual exclusivity. In a group meeting Kajal tells the story of her friend who got into a fight with her Panthis' ex-lover (another Kothi); as the friend was being beaten up the thing she tried to protect was her phone, for she knew that there was evidence on it. The friend ended up in hospital 'but thank God the phone was saved' says Kajal.

Kothis speak of never being able to leave their phones 'just lying around'. Kashish, who lives with his mother and two married sisters and their families in a traditional Indian joint family, says he gives his family strict instructions not to touch his phone, going to the extent that he keeps his phone on silent mode when he is at home. He says 'I don't want to draw any attention to my phone when I am at home even though I keep deleting the messages. Sometimes you want to save some messages forever, but I can't afford to. What would happen if my nephews and nieces saw what was on my phone?'

Kothis are harassed and blackmailed when, unbeknownst to them, they are filmed having sex. The 'filmmakers' are usually spurned, angry Panthis or jealous and scheming Kothis. These videos are used to threaten Kothis with

being out-ed to their families in order to extort money from them. But in a twist, some Kothis who have unreliable employment, or those that rely on sex work for their livelihood, find that the phone has provided new opportunities for them to make some money on the side. For example, participants share instances of Kothi sex workers who 'ensnare' school-age or college-going boys into sex and secretly take photographs of them, later blackmailing them into paying money in exchange for not revealing the boys' secret homosexual lives to their families.

Gay/MSM parties in suburban farm houses outside the city have become popular social venues. According to the project coordinator of Amcha Ghar these become sites of what he calls 'event-based violence'. The police get tipped off about MSM parties and conduct raids with the intent of extortion rather than actually charging anyone under Section 377 (a law since revoked in 2009) MSM at these events, emboldened by their strength in numbers, and alcohol, may react violently rather than defusing the situation. He feels that this is an issue that needs to be carefully handled rather than aggressively reacted to. However, a mob at a party is not easy to manage and negotiate with. Police do resort to using violence leading to clashes between MSM party-goers and the police.

There has also been increased reporting of new forms of violence against and harassment of queer men. Recently there have been cases of queer men being entrapped and exploited through scams and rackets. In one case, local Mumbai policemen were at the centre of the scam; they used a decoy to entrap queer men in sex, and then appeared on the scene threatening to book them under Section 377 unless they paid money (Andhale 2008). A *Times of India* report (Divya 2008) discusses how blackmailers have become tech-savvy, cruising gay chat rooms to find targets who they develop an online relationship with, and make promises of sex, only to then arrive at a pre-decided location pretending to be plainclothes policemen and threatening to charge them under Section 377. This is reminiscent of the 2006 incident where policemen in the city of Lucknow masqueraded as gay men and registered on a queer dating site, Guys4Men. The police solicited sex and meetings and eventually 'invited' five men to a public park, where the hapless victims were arrested for obscenity, soliciting sex in public and of conducting homosexual behaviours. Interestingly, and aside from the deceit and entrapment, the five gay men were arrested for fantasies online rather than any specific offline behaviour (Shah 2007).

The most routine form of harassment that Kothis face of course remains street-based harassment and violence from the police, often even in the absence of actual cruising. Kashish talks of an experience when the mobile phone literally came to his rescue. He was stopped by the police one night at a train station after completing his first few weeks in condom distribution and outreach work. Nervous and unsure of how to extricate himself Kashish wanted to get in touch with his boss. He found that his talk-time credit had run out and all he had left was exactly enough to send one message his boss. Since incoming calls are free the boss was able to guide Kashish, tell him exactly what to say and help him negotiate with the police. He remained in touch till Kashish reached home.

I would have been very scared without having [...] to talk to. Moreover, if something had happened to me, no one would have known about it till much later. The mobile really saved me this time!

(Kashish)

However, as an example of the adaptation function of the mobile phone, Kothis discuss how the mobile phone is productively used during cruising, and even in just everyday situations, by creating a sense of 'purposefulness' (Phadke *et al.* 2006; Phadke 2006). Mobile phones create a very real sense of safety and protection in situations of harassment by the police. If they are being harassed for loitering when they are actually cruising, all Kothis do is to pretend to be waiting for someone by talking on the phone; sometimes just holding a phone up to the ear diverts attention from the fact that they are cruising.

Kothis' experiences of being the victims and perpetrators of mobile-mediated violence have important implications for different fields of study, not least research and work with Kothi communities. These recent applications of power and violence across different vulnerable communities are rarely discussed in ICT4D studies. A review of research literature about the internet (Bhattacharjya and Ganesh 2008) reveals that the notion of online harm tends to focus on the risks for paedophilia and the inappropriate exposure of young people to sexual content. This has led to the formation of a strong lobby to control media spaces, particularly the internet, and police it by establishing censorship policies. Anxiety about online spaces in Southern contexts can be related to fears of the loosening of cultural 'integrity,' nationhood and national identity, or of political control, as is evident from strict censorship regimes in countries like Egypt, China, Tunisia and so on (Open Net Initiative 2009). The actual understanding of what constitutes 'harm' exposes the political underpinnings (or lack thereof) of such research. The issue of what constitutes harm through/by technology need to be interrogated: harm to whom, and from what? The particular kinds of risks that women face from cyber stalking and cyber harassment, or marginalised sexual communities like Kothis face, are rarely discussed in policy or activism around technology.

5 Concluding thoughts

Mobility has significant ramifications in a culture where caste, class and location can physically and socially immobilise entire communities. Mobility is a seductive idea: managing multiple relationships across social roles and between physical places, implies a kind of statelessness, a sense of being free-floating and casual about boundaries. What it means to be mobile also has profound implications because ideas of 'home', 'private' and 'public' tend to be very specifically defined in this cultural context. The form and function of the mobile phone immediately disrupt notions of space and the distinctions between 'private' and 'public' collapse (Bull 2004). What was once considered appropriate only in private can now confidently be conducted in public, and it is equally possible to be a part of the crowd from within the most private spaces.

The ethereal nature of mobile-phone interactions sidesteps the spatial, sometimes invisible barriers that 'outsiders' like Kothis and sex workers face on city streets. Nonetheless, this ability to fly over physical and moral restrictions is tenuous. So, while the potential to enact sexuality, social relationships and romance through the phone result in a sense of agency, these relationships still exist in offline, social contexts that can be discriminatory and harsh.

Getting aroused at bus-stops, hook-ups on trains, finding love and sex through numbers written on toilet walls, the missed calling, text-relationships, BP-sharing and accessing porn on-the-go rather than furtively, the cross-pollination of erotic exchanges through numbers and contacts, are all private moments and acts that now populate the ether, unseen, yet exist as real intimacies that can be recorded, saved and shared. These acts seem to define what it means to be sexual today, whether Kothi or not, and create an experience of erotic networks that give a form, as it were, to sexuality.

Carolyn Marvin says in her study of 'old' media that new media provid[e] new platforms on which old groups confront each other. Old habits of transacting between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or *seem to alter*, critical social distances.' Moreover, she says, the emphasis is less on the instrument, in fact it is on the 'drama' in which groups negotiate power, authority, representation' (1990: 5, emphasis added).

The 'drama' Marvin refers to comes through in Kothis' descriptions of their micro-practices of mobile phone use. There is excitement manifested in an inability to let go of the phone or stop looking at it, to feel addicted to immediacy. However, the persistent reality of violence and the emergence of new manifestations of violence are evidence of the old adage about things staying the same even as they appear to change. Sometimes the actors exchange roles, and anyone in a network can always find someone more vulnerable to enact violence on. No technology can be expected to erase social discrimination, or immobility.

As I have described, the dynamics of Kothi interactions with partners, lovers, family members and each other, are immersed in, and produce, the multiple, erotic economies. These economies, and mobility, are important ways to understand social and sexual status, social place, power and control in intimate relationships, the management and negotiations of sexual, intimate and emotional 'work'. The management of emotional (and sometimes financial) resources operate as capacities, levers and pivots that allow Kothis to participate in these networks. The most arousing pornographic image and the partner Kashish could ensnare with it, the sexy text message that makes all the other Kothis green with envy, the sweet romantic phone call, Bilqis' missed calls, the shiny look and features of a phone are powerful currencies swirling around in exchanges in these economies, so much so that the exchange and the currency seems to become as important as who is doing the exchanging. Just as capital, money and status can be empowering, I believe these erotic currencies are equally potent ways for Kothis to feel agency and control. Ismail for example actively works at climbing up a ladder that he perceives himself to be at the base of. What the mobile phone signifies and what it makes possible

is perhaps just one of the ways in which Ismail can legitimately aspire to gayness. There is a palpable sense of agency he believes this gives him.

I have so far portrayed Kothis' use of mobile phones in terms of the multiple intimate economies they operate in and simultaneously produce. It is likely that any other low-income community, situated in any part of this country, that uses media technologies will produce their own versions of these. Whither 'development' then? My assertion is that the approach of 'just-plug-in' is limited when it fails to recognise the macro context and the highly specific micro-contexts in which technologies and people interact. It is possible that any sort of detailed ethnographic appreciation of how people interact with their technologies could result in findings that provide insights into how people would *actually* use, pervert, share, distort, subvert or challenge these applications and uses. Not only will this contribute to a better understanding of communities receiving aid through ICT applications, but equally to a better evaluation and assessment of the success of these programmes, how to avoid failure and maximise impact. It has ramifications for understandings of development itself.

An interview with a designer for Nokia in India, Jan Blom, discusses statistics, the 'bottom of the pyramid' and the power and ubiquity of text messaging in the country, but ends with:

But there is danger of too much concentration on left-brain concepts of economic development: discussion is around a framework of what would increase productivity, livelihoods and so on. But I think a major area that we need knowledge of is that people are also seeking playful experiences and emotional expression. We should really be looking at the role of ICTs enabling these experiences. When we go into bottom of the pyramid users, we should be looking at applications which bring about joy and social interaction.

(Internews 2008: 24)

How will impact be measured then? How will 'development' be understood through the joy and social interaction Blom mentions? If development is understood as wellbeing and quality of life, these are all intrinsically political questions as well. If media technologies have to be sensitively and significantly integrated into the lives of the poor in a development context, then Development would need to engage with the holistic, robust, energetic lives that people enjoy through their technologies anyway.

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